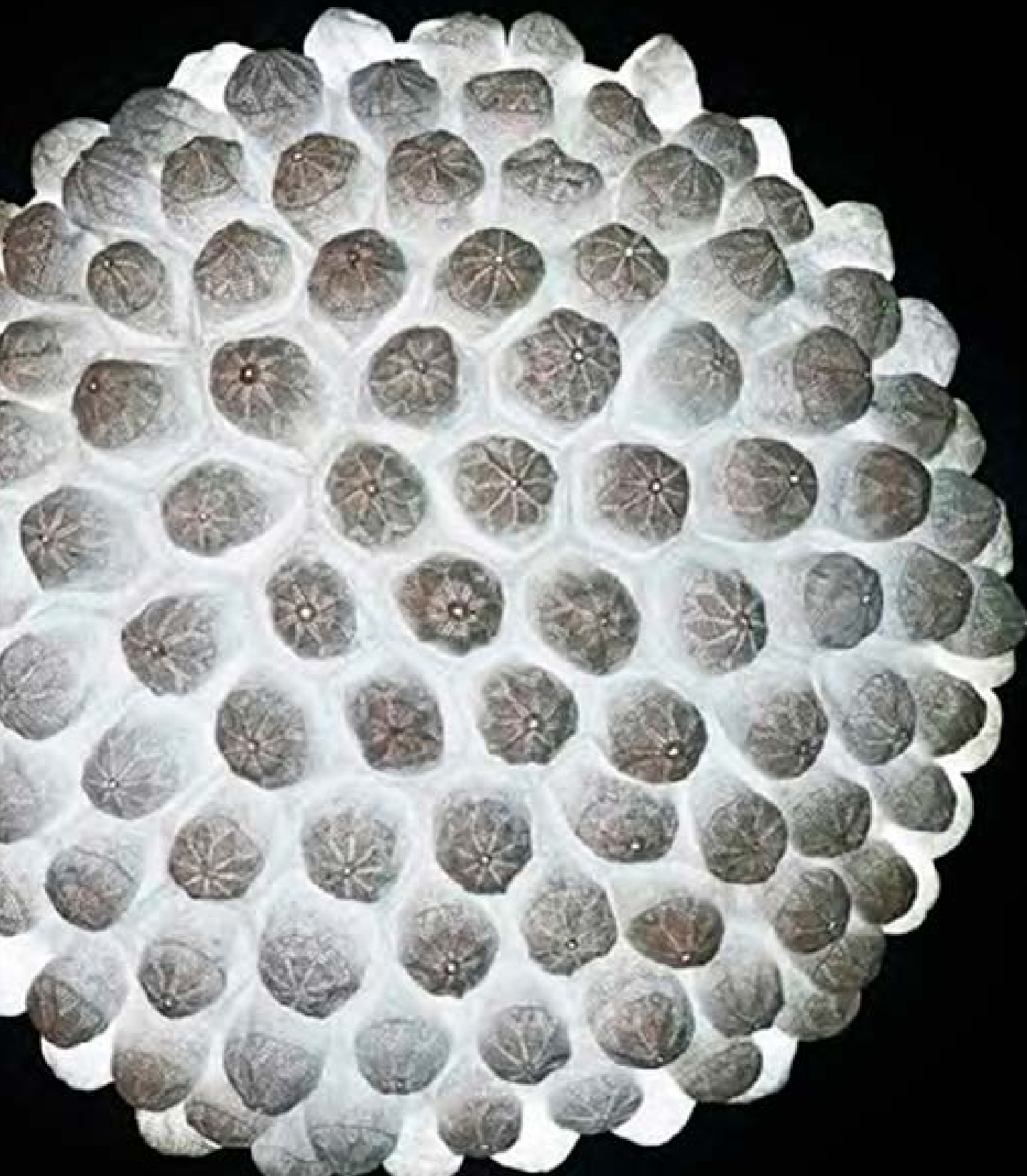


THE 64th **BLAKE PRIZE**

13 February – 24 April 2016
Secondary Education Kit



The Blake Prize

Established in 1951, *The Blake Prize* is an open art prize that invites national and international artists of all beliefs, artistic styles and media to explore ideas concerning religion and spirituality. *The Blake Prize* takes its name from William Blake (1757 – 1827), an English engraver, artist, author and poet, whose life and broad artistry were influenced by an intense love of the spiritual world. From 2016, The Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre will deliver *The Blake Prize* every second year into the future.

Rites And Rituals

According to contemporary philosopher and atheist Alain de Botton (b. 1969), religion can provide moral guidance that suppresses our more destructive human qualities, enabling us to live harmoniously in communities. It may also comfort us when dealing with psychological or physical suffering, helping us to survive the challenges of life. Such guidance and comfort is often provided through the rites and rituals at the core of many religious and spiritual practices. As de Botton states, “The ritual is in truth a form of compensation, a transformational moment when depletion can be digested and sweetened.” (de Botton, 2012, p. 62)

Although we use them today in a much broader context, the words rite and ritual stem from the Latin word *ritus*, meaning, “religious observance, ceremony, custom or usage.” Rites and rituals mark changes in seasons and chart the life of an individual, connecting them to a group of people, a particular time or place. Rituals unite an individual with those who have previously passed through this rite or performed this ritual to become a part of our self-understanding and cultural and spiritual identity. Though beliefs and cultures differ, it is interesting to explore some rituals and the characteristics they have in common.

Consider repetition in relation to rituals and spirituality. A **pilgrimage**, involves the repetitive act of walking that provides a space for the pilgrim to contemplate and reflect on their faith. The act of prayer is also performed repeatedly. For example, the **Islamic** prayer ritual, *Salat* is performed by Muslims five times during the day. In *Salat*, there is a series of physical movements that are linked to the spoken prayer, connecting body, mind and spirit. It is a constant reminder of one’s dedication to Islam performed worldwide throughout the day, acting as a uniting thread.

Many religious or spiritual rituals are momentary in nature or performed on a repeated basis. Time and again, comfort, connection and insight are found through the repeated act. The believer returns to the temple, the monk to meditation, the artist to the studio.

Rites can serve a **redemptive** purpose. Bathing rituals are a form of purification and part of many different religions. In Christianity, baptism may involve sprinkling a person with or dipping their body into water. This ritual is performed at different ages depending on the **denomination**; it cleanses the person of past sins and welcomes them into a group. A number of Jewish rituals involve bathing in a *Mikveh*. This is a specially constructed ritual bath that connects to a natural water source believed to purify a person converting to **Judaism**. This ritual is also performed by a bride and groom before their wedding and after contact with a human or animal that died from natural causes.

In some cultures, rites can also serve the function of **initiation**, such as those performed by many Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. The initiation ceremony known as *Bora*, is an extremely important part of Indigenous Australian cultural life that involves the passing on of sacred knowledge and skills. In some areas, the successful completion is indicated by the removal of the initiate's front tooth. This ritual uses physical and mental challenge as a sign of growth and maturity which is also present in other rituals such as the Jewish **Bar Mitzvah & Bat Mitzvah**.

There are many similarities between art and ritual. Artists have long been inspired by religious practices, using their work to glorify, educate, question and critique. Many aspects of spiritual practice involve artistic expression, as seen in the illustration of spiritual or religious stories, the objects used in rituals and in the spaces they take place. Characteristics of spiritual rituals are also reflected in contemporary arts practices.

The depiction of spiritual rituals was primarily a way to educate the masses, beginning in a time when few people were literate. For example, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, documents the first **Holy Communion** and is a constant reminder of its significance for those who partake in it.

Other artistic elements of rituals include carefully crafted objects or tools used in ceremonies. For example, the moon meditation scrolls of **Zen Buddhism**. This scroll is made of rice paper, dyed indigo blue and painted with a golden circle, suspended within a simple, but carefully crafted wooden frame. It provides a visual point of focus for meditating monks when there is no full moon in the sky.

The places that house rites and rituals are also expressions of human creativity. To stand in front of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul and admire the **ornate** tiling, gold gilding and floral motifs on the underside of the stone awning is to appreciate the effort that went into creating such sacred spaces.

Religious rituals continue to be of interest to artists because they reflect who we are as individuals and groups as demonstrated by the diversity of artworks in *The 64th Blake Prize*. Some of the artworks relate directly to the artist's own spirituality, while others come from a perspective of **secular** or theoretical inquiry. Scholar Loren Lerner believes that art is the most appropriate space for spiritual concepts to be explored because it releases some of the negative aspects of religion, allowing for more objective and considered conversation. Art can provide an abstraction of ideas that opens up a more thoughtful space for discussion.



Tamara Dean, *Shoaling*, 2015, photography, 156 x 200 cm

Take for example the way some artists have translated motifs or actions that are part of a religious practice. In the work *Shoaling* (2015), Tamara Dean depicts youths swimming in a body of water. Dean has taken the idea of water and ritual and placed these in a contemporary, secular context. Dean is exploring contemporary rites of passage and the role rituals continue to play in life.

Alternatively, Darron Davies' artwork *The Spare Room, Tatsuki, Japan* (2015) looks at the way spiritual spaces are created through significant and meaningful objects. His photographic work depicts a woman kneeling in a room before a shrine. Family portraits sit atop a small altar while **poignant** objects such as candles, flowers, ornaments and offerings are distributed beneath it. To the left of this space is what appears to be a more formal shrine which provides an interesting comparison between the formal and personal rituals of spirituality.

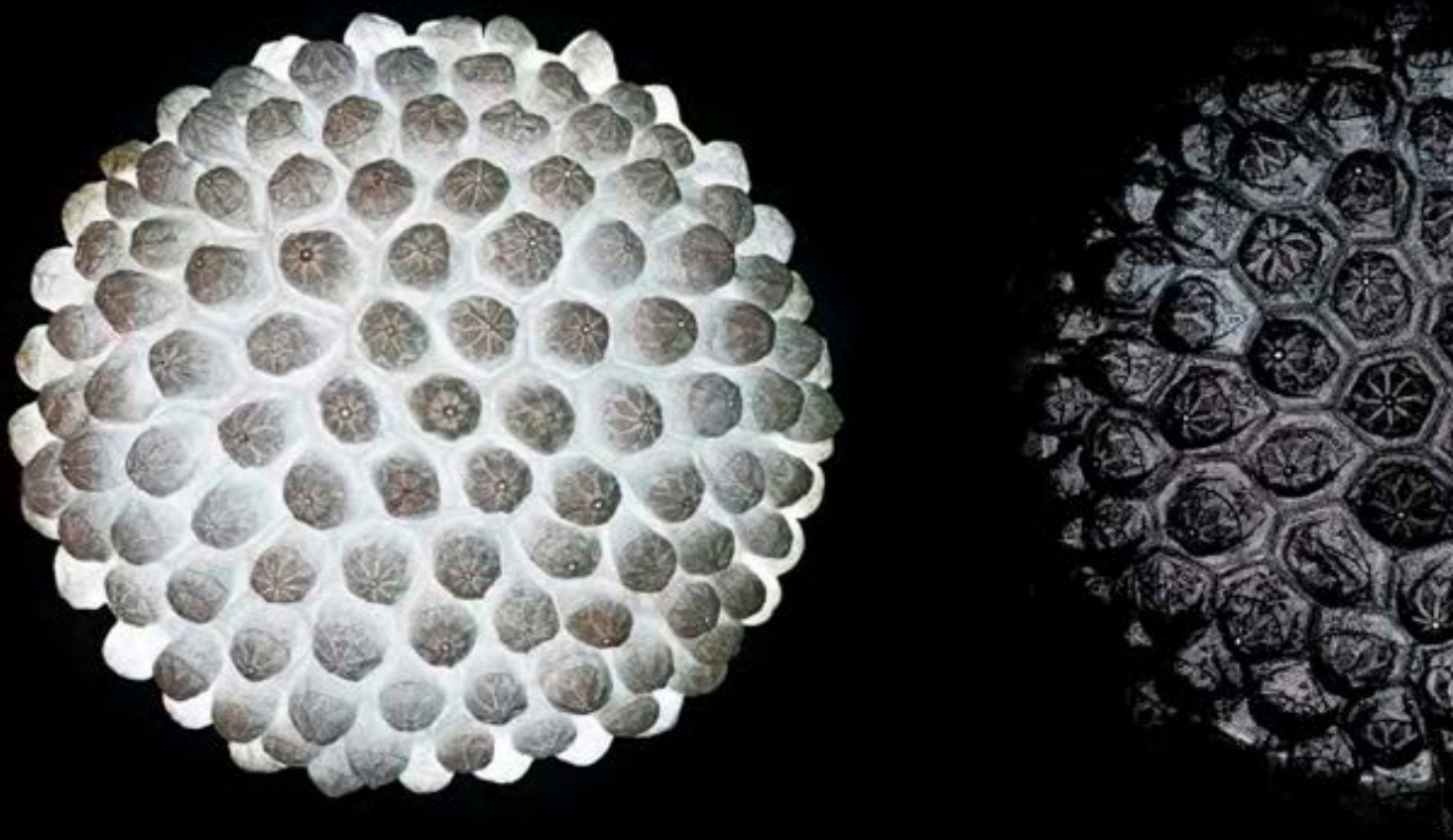
In Abdullah M I Syed's *Aura I and II* (2014), repetition is evident in the construction of a glowing sculpture created by piecing together hand-stitched white skull-caps. The caps are worn by Muslims for religious purposes including during Salat prayer. By placing them together en masse, the artist suggests the insight and comfort that can occur through the repeated act of prayer and the connection between people when they come together to pray.

Some artistic practices share qualities found in the rites and rituals themselves, such as repetition, attention and intention. In this exhibition, the work *48 Votive Offerings for the Preservation of Mental Wellbeing* (2015) by Vera Zulumovski illustrates the role repetition plays in the ritual of offering. Zulumovski's artwork is comprised of 48 black and white prints. The positive and negative images, some printed on old maps, are reminiscent of a **Rorschach Test**. The repeated motifs and the title of the work suggest a ritual making process that provides comfort to artist and viewer.

By adopting and transforming spiritual practices, artists are able to explore the broader meanings and implications of these ancient, varied acts. They are able to explore the relationship between the body and mind when it is engaged in a repetitive process as well as the redemptive capacity of repetition.

Darron Davies, *The Spare Room, Tatsuki, Japan*, 2015, photography, 45 x 70cm

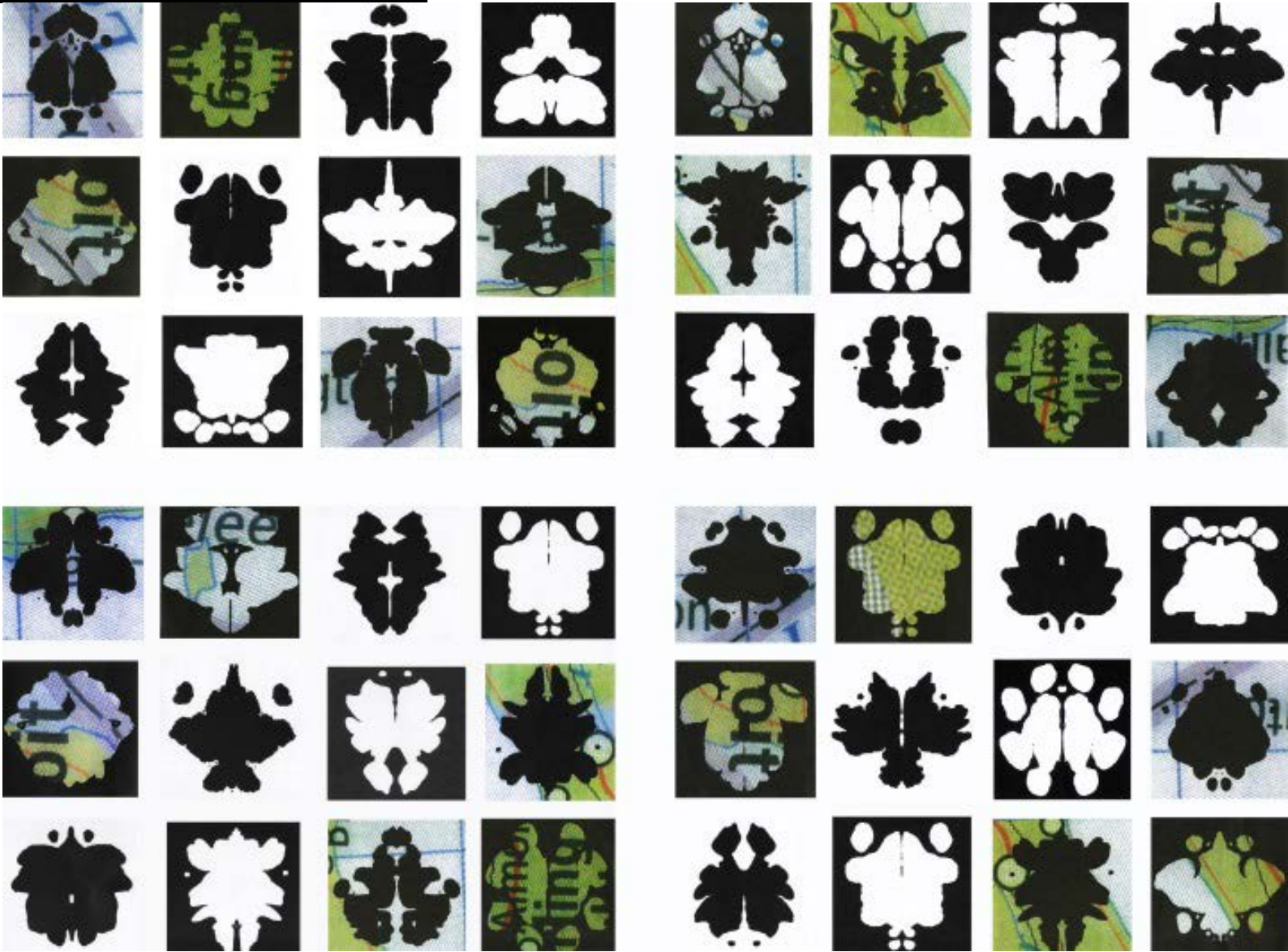




Abdullah M I Syed, *Aura I and II (duo)*, 2014, hand-stitched crochet taqiyah (skull caps), Perspex and LED light, 68cm x 50cm



Vera Zulumovski, *48 Votive Offerings for the Preservation of Mental Wellbeing*, 2015,
Laser print on archival paper 220 x 280cm



Questions and Activities

Questions Invent your own religion. What would your imaginary religion be called? Who or what would be worshipped? What would your religion teach? What rituals would be practiced by its followers? What objects would be used?

Activity Think about places of worship and how they differ visually. Create a diorama or model of a spiritual space for your imaginary religion. Beautify your spiritual space with objects, materials and symbols that reflect aspects of your religion.

Questions Research an artist either from *The 64th Blake Prize*, or another artist of interest to you who engages in a repetitive act as part of their art practice. Discuss with your class why you think they do this and what can be learnt by either the artist or the viewer.

Activity Are there objects in your home that are part of a non-religious ritual? Choose one object that has some meaning to you. Create a series of at least 10 images of your object. They may be drawings, photographs or collages.

After you have completed the exercise, discuss with your class whether you discovered something new about the object. Did repeating the image make you respond differently to it? How does this compare or contrast to your idea of a spiritual ritual?

Glossary

Pilgrimage: a journey to a place of particular interest or importance.

Redemptive: acting to save someone from error or evil.

Denomination: a recognised, separate branch of any religion.

Judaism: the Jewish religion which takes its laws from the Old Testament and the teachings of the rabbis as explained in the Talmud.

Initiation: the action of admitting someone into a secret society or group, typically with a ritual.

Islam: is a monotheistic religion explained by the Quran.

Bar Mitzvah / Bat Mitzvah: the ceremony and feast when a Jewish boy or girl turns 13 and learns and demonstrates particular religious responsibilities.

Holy Communion: a rite of Christianity (also known as the Eucharist) where bread and wine are declared sacred and shared by worshipers to commemorate Jesus' death. The bread symbolises Jesus' body and the wine symbolises his blood.

Zen Buddhism: a Japanese school of one of the branches of Buddhism emphasizing personal spiritual practice such as meditation and intuition over ritual worship or study of sacred writings.

Secular: not relating to or connected with religious or spiritual matters.

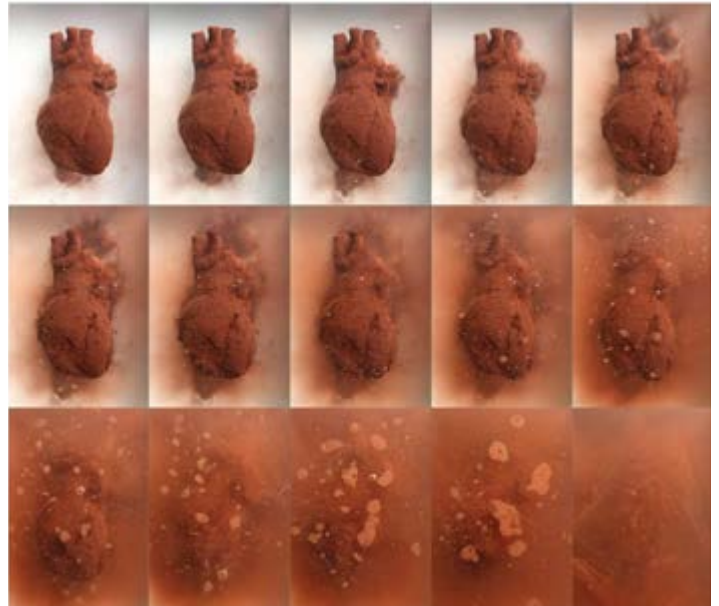
Poignant: deeply affecting or emotionally moving.

Rorschach Test: a psychological test in which a person's perceptions of inkblots are

Winning Works

Blake Prize Winner

Yardena Kurulkar
Kenosis, 2015
Inkjet print on archival paper
70 x 60 x 5 in



Established Artist Winner

Robert Hague
The Messenger, 2015
Carrara marble
28 x 68 x 34cm



Emerging Artist Winner

Damien Shen
*On the fabric of the
Ngarrindjeri body*
Etching , 2015
50 x 31cm



Works Cited

de Botton, A. (2012). *Religion for Atheists*. London: Penguin Books.

Fer, B. (2004). *The Infinite Line: re-making art after Modernism*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Lerner, L. (2013). Special Section on Contemporary Art and Religion. *Religion and the Arts*, 17, 1-19.

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Front Cover image: Abdullah M I Syed, Aura I and II (duo), 2014, hand-stitched crochet taqiyah (skull caps), Perspex and LED light, 68cm x 50cm

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Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre is a cultural facility of Liverpool Council.

